

Acting Out sermon series  
The Word and the Words  
August 13, 2023  
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You may know the name Ralph Stanley. He's a legend in the music world, a bluegrass and folk singer with a gravelly, haunting voice. One of Stanley's CDs is a two-volume set. One of the volumes is called "Sunday Morning" and has songs about preaching and praying and God and such. The other volume is called "Saturday Night" and has songs about the "real" stuff of life, like working hard, raising kids, taking care of each other, and facing death. To quote Rudyard Kipling, "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet." Or should they?

Stanley isn't the only one who sees a big difference between what we say on Saturday night and what we say on Sunday morning. Chances are a lot of people come to church on Sunday morning because of what they said on Saturday night! And yet, I would argue that the words we speak in the world should be informed by the words we speak in church, and the words we speak in church should transform the words we speak in the world.

We all know the power our words carry. How many of us, when we were kids, would have rather gotten a spanking than a lecture? My step-father would say, "Kory Thomas, we need to talk," and I would think, "Wouldn't you rather beat me instead?" At least the pain from a spanking fades, but the words of rebuke or disappointment would last a lot longer. Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can really hurt, too.

But along with the danger of words come their beauty and generative power. Remember in Genesis God *said*, "Let there be light." God spoke the world into being. Words are the wombs from which rich symbolism and uplifting humor are born. After all, without words, we wouldn't have puns! Words have the power to create as much as they do destroy. Just ask anyone who has said the words, "I do," or has heard the words, "You're hired," or has been told, "I love you."

The meaning of words is often conveyed in how you use them. After all, the same word can mean very different things, depending on the situation. A great example of this comes from the gangster movie "Donnie Brasco," starring Leonardo DiCaprio. Someone asks him the meaning of "forget about it," and he delivers this colorful explanation, which I'm going to clean up for church use. After all, some Saturday night words just aren't appropriate for Sunday morning. Brasco says, "Forget about it is like if you agree with someone, you know, like 'Raquel Welch is one beautiful woman, forget about it.' But then, if you disagree, like 'A Lincoln is better than a Cadillac? Forget about it!' You know? But then, it's also like if something's the greatest thing in the world, like 'That linguini? Forget about it.' But it's also like saying 'Go to heck!' too. Like, you know, someone says 'Hey Paulie, you got a big nose!' and Paulie says 'Forget about it!' And sometimes it just means forget about it." The words we use are brought to life by how and when we use them.

Let's talk about how we use words in worship. We speak words to God, better known as prayers, such as the invocation, benediction, the pastoral prayer and our prayers at the table; we speak with each other, through the call to worship, the announcements, and the informal greeting time before and after worship; and God speaks to us throughout all of it, including but certainly not limited to the scripture readings and the sermon.

And during worship, we believe God DOES speak. Worship is a conversation with God, a dialogue between humans and the divine in which we offer God our praise and God speaks a

word of comfort or challenge or encouragement to us. As Fred Craddock wrote, “Preaching increases in power when it is dialogical, when speaker and listener share in the proclamation of the Word.”

You see, we all share in the responsibility of speaking our praise to God, and that shared communication doesn’t end when the last word of the benediction is spoken. Ron Allen, my preaching professor, cautions against saying “Amen” at the end of a sermon because that implies the end of the conversation. Rather, the end of the sermon and the end of the service should be the beginning of a conversation that continues in the hallways and during the ride home and at the dinner table and in board meetings and on the playground. The words we speak in worship are not the period at the end of the sentence, but the capital letter at the beginning of a sentence that continues to be spoken Monday through Saturday as we ponder what God is calling us to do and be.

So, our conversation together in worship is crucial for us as we think about the link between Saturday night and Sunday morning. We may not think there’s a connection. Maybe we would rather not let the two intermingle. “I’ll keep my Sunday words like ‘forgiveness’ and ‘grace’ and ‘Thy will be done’ right where they belong.” We may be like comedian Flip Wilson, who said, “I’m a Jehovah’s Bystander. They wanted me to become a Jehovah’s Witness but I didn’t want to get involved.”

But I believe our faith compels us to get involved, to use the words we learn on Sunday in our daily lives. Professor Tom Long calls worship “the language school of God.” He says that on Sunday we have the opportunity to speak our faith, and it is through saying these things out loud that we come to know what we truly believe. He says we talk ourselves into being Christian by practicing the words we learn here and then saying them outside of here.

We are learning to speak what Long calls authentic God talk. God’s name is invoked a lot in our world, but not all of them are authentic to who God is. I wish God’s name was only abused in cusswords, because at least then the misuse would be easier to identify. Sometimes it feels like God’s name is used as a weapon to beat down people who believe differently or to entice people to give money to questionable causes. Sometimes God’s name is used to justify injustices and to sanction immoral choices. The great tragedy in our world is that people hear so much counterfeit God talk they become numb to the real thing.

I’m reading a book right now called “When the Center Does Not Hold: Leading in the Age of Polarization” by David Brubaker. There’s a whole chapter on language and how it has become a weapon of polarization. We use words that live at the extreme end of the poles – right and wrong, liberal and conservative, pro-this and anti-that. That kind of language doesn’t allow for nuance. What’s in the middle between right and wrong? What’s the mid-point between pro-and anti-? We use language to make assumptions and draw conclusions about people that leave no room for the complexity of the issues or the paradoxes we face in figuring out what we believe about them. For example, can I value the sanctity of life and still support women having control over their own bodies?

I received a scathing series of emails recently from a visitor who took great umbrage with the fact our prayer list included victims of gun violence. He wrote me a manifesto about how the term “gun violence” carried within it the erroneous meaning that guns cause violence. He riddled my character with bullets of accusations and ended by accusing me of wanting to hug Osama bin Laden. All based on the fact our bulletin encouraged people to pray for victims of gun violence. The words we speak matter. By the way, I took out the word “gun,” so that we are now called to pray for victims of violence of any kind, including gun violence.

The nuance of language, so lost in our larger world, must be recaptured by the words we speak in worship. I don't define for you what it means to pray for victims of violence or what it means to forgive those who have sinned against us or how to interpret that Christ's body was broken for you. That's for you and God to work out together. But in doing so, we honor the complexity of our words and we seek to live, not at the sides, where we are all polarized, but in the midst of the spectrum, where we acknowledge we may slide this way or that, depending on what the words we say mean to us. God's love may mean one thing to a person whose parent is dying, but quite another to a person who is crushed by the guilt of a recent action.

So, our homework each Sunday is to figure out how our language can bridge the gap between Saturday night and Sunday morning. Long says that "perceiving the reciprocity between Saturday night and Sunday morning enables us to worship as people who have real lives and to live as people who are in worship relationship to God." Worship is our dress-rehearsal for the drama of the Monday-to-Saturday world.

That means when we leave this place, the words we speak stay with us and as we speak them, the places we go become holy places. Our homes become sanctuaries, our jobs become places of ministry. For example, when faced with a dying planet, we may not recite the psalm that says, "The earth is the Lord's and all that's in it," but we live out that language in our responses and actions. We may not repeat, "This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it," but we say those words in how we spend the day and how we treat each other. We may not quote Micah who says, "What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God," but we speak those words when we seek to live them out in our communities. As we let the language of worship saturate us, as we let it permeate our own vocabulary, we offer the world a different language than the one of greed and destruction and violence and polarization.

We pray and we respond and we read scripture and we hear sermons so that all of us may be inspired by the Spirit of God to go out into the world and do what we talk about. Sometimes it is hard to take those words with us; it would be easier to leave them in the sanctuary. But it is up to us, you and me, to give them life. To make them come alive, to give those words true meaning, we must embody them, we must be doers of the words we speak and hear. When we show what it means to love, to forgive, to be gracious, we move beyond the limits of our language to the infinite reach of God's love. In a world filled with words that tear down, we need more words that build up, that light up the darkness of our world. We speak and listen to those powerful words each Sunday. 'May the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer.' Now, let the conversation continue.